

Today we are gathered here in a salute to Black Women.

Not simply a salute to those of us who are here, or even to the many who cannot be present today, or the famous or the infamous, even. But to the many -- many nameless -- who came before us and upon whose backs we sit here today. To the many who made a better world for us black women. Let us pause to remember a few of those whose shoulders we trod upon, who are the reason we can be here today and celebrate our black womanhood, not mourn it.

Although our history is replete with examples of the courage of these Black Women, it is equally replete with omissions of those examples. We should review a bit of that history here today.

Let me share with you three accounts of the life of Black Women who lived -- and survived -- as slaves.

A SLAVE WOMAN RUNS A MIDNIGHT SCHOOL

In Natchez, Louisiana, there were two schools taught by colored teachers. One of these was a slave woman who had taught a midnight school for a year. It was opened at eleven or twelve o'clock at night, and closed at two o'clock am. ... Milla Granson, the teacher, learned to read and write from the children of her indulgent master in her old Kentucky home. Her number of scholars was twelve at a time, and when she had taught these to read and write she dismissed them, and again took her apostolic number and brought them up to the extent of her ability, until she had graduated hundreds. A number of them

wrote their own passes and started for Canada...

At length her night school project leaked out, and was for a time suspended; but it was not known that seven of the twelve years subsequent to leaving Kentucky had been spent in this work.

Much excitement over her night school was produced. The subject was discussed in their legislature, and a bill was passed, that it should not be held illegal for a slave to teach a slave...She not only (re)opened her night school, but a Sabbath school...Milla Granson as good language as any of the white people.

Laura S. Haviland, a Woman's Life Work,
Chicago; Publishing Association of
Friends, 1889; copyright 1881), pp 300-301

--- and for those of you who are concerned about child care centers, consider this:

THE NURSING MOTHERS

...As we went out in the morning I observed several women, who carried their young children in their arms to the field. These mothers laid their children at the side of the fence, or under the shade of the cotton plants, whilst they were at work; and when the rest of us went to get water, they would go to give suck to their children, requesting someone to bring water in gourds, which they were careful to carry to the field with them. One young woman, did not, like the others, leave her child at the end of the row, but had contrived a sort of rude knapsack, made of a piece of coarse linen cloth, in which she fastened her

child, which was very young, upon her back; and in this way carried it all day, and performed her task at the hoe with the other people.

Charles Ball, Slavery in the United States;
A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of
Charles Ball, A Black Man (Lewistown,
Pennsylvania: J. W. Shugert 1836)

... and this perhaps is the origin of the motto for many of us...

... not to mention the style.

FIGHT, AND IF YOU CAN'T FIGHT, KICK

My mother was the smartest black women in Eden. She was a quick as a flash of lightning, and whatever she did could not be done better. She could do anything. She cooked, washed, ironed, spun, nursed and labored in the field. She made as good a field hand as she did a cook. I have heard Master Jennings say to his wife, "Fannie has her faults, but she can outwork any nigger in the country. I'd bet my life on that."

My mother certainly had her faults as a slave. She was very different in nature from Aunt Caroline. Ma Fussed, fought, and kicked all the time, I tell you, she was a demon. She said that she wouldn't be whipped, and when she fussed all Eden must have known it. She was loud and boisterous, and it seemed to me that you could hear her a mile away. Father was often the prey of her high temper. With all her ability for work, she did not make a good slave. She was too high spirited and independent. I tell you, she was a captain.

The one doctrine of my mother's teaching which was branded upon

my senses was that I should never let anyone abuse me. "I'll kill you gal, if you don't stand up for yourself," she would say. "Fight, and if you can't fight, kick; and if you can't kick, then bite." Ma was generally willing to work, but if she didn't feel like doing something, none could make her do it.

(Ophelia Settle Egypt, J. Masuoka, Charles S. Johnson), "Unwritten History of Slavery; Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves," Social Science Documents No. 1 (Nashville, Tennessee: Fish University, Social Science Institute, 1945,) bound typescript pp 284-291

That these women survived can be attested to by the fact that during the great westward expansion, when

- a Black Woman named Mary Fields, hauled freight in Montana in 1884, carried the U.S. mail in 1885, ran a laundry at the age of 70, and then operated as a one woman collection agency when she left a saloon to fell with one blow a customer who failed to pay his laundry bill.
- a Black Woman named Edmonia Lewis, contributed mightily to the culture of the West and indeed the entire country as the first Black Woman sculptress.
- a Black woman named Clara Brown at age 59 found herself in a westward caravan of 30 covered wagons and seven years later had accumulated through her efforts \$10,000 -- despite the fact that she never refused help to anyone in need; that Clara Brown purchased her own wagon to relocate her relatives in the West and sponsored many other Black wagon trains.
- a Black woman named Biddy Mason trudged behind 300 wagons of her master's caravan keeping cattle together during the trip from Mississippi to California; that Biddy Mason refused to return to Mississippi; that through hard work and clever investments Biddy amassed a fortune in land which she donated for use as schools, nursing homes and churches.

when --(talk about Black Women Organized for Action)

One hundred Black Women formed a ~~✓~~ vigilante committee to protect their sister, Mary Johnson, after white neighbors in a section of Los Angeles, invaded the Johnson's home and threw their belongings onto the lawn.

And so, because they too survived, we can still salute our Black Women.
~~The~~

The Black Women of today who love and care and work and struggle in the context of a history of loving and caring and struggling, largely unwritten.

Though most of us will not appear as names in a history book, we shall live in the struggle to be carried on through our own children and grandchildren.

But if we stand tall, it is because we stand on the shoulders of Black Women who were ten feet tall.

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(note: I believe the last line is a paraphrase of Emerson's -- and if you know it, to be so, then it should probably be preceded with a statement to the effect of ... "to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson...")

If I get a chance, I'll look it up.

BLACK WOMEN.

We ourselves
~~✓~~ SALUTE US.

Jean Kresy-Poree
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